

# A Century Flies By

Cartier celebrates 100 years  
of the Santos

Nicholas Foulkes



Whether it really was the first wristwatch or not is a moot point – the Cartier de Santos remains a living legend. It was 100 years ago that the friendship between an aviation pioneer and a jeweller bore the classic design, which has barely changed since. And of all the models launched by Cartier at this year's Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie, it is still the Santos that continues to fly high. *QP* spoke to Cartier president Bernard Fornas, who lifted the lid on this most noble of wristwatches.



The new 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, oversized Santos 100 (£3,400). The original watch was a forerunner in art deco design, with geometrical design and rounded angles. This model's combination of gold and steel was first introduced in 1978. The Santos' octagonal crown is topped with a natural blue sapphire cabochon.

(Previous page) The Santos bucked trends by making a feature of what others hid: screws. Note also the trademark 'Cartier' logo in the 'VII' hour marker.

The last time I interviewed a Cartier president, his name was Alain Dominique Perrin and – as I recall – he worked in rather smart offices near Avenue Georges V. A few years on, a great deal has changed. Perrin was first promoted to the position of über-boss of Richemont, and then promoted again into what seems like retirement. Into the vacuum stepped a youngish man by the name of Guy Leymarie.

Leymarie was moved over to Cartier from Dunhill, and I have to say that he did not really strike me as a suitable custodian of Cartier. I was not a great fan of his Dunhill relaunch, and his treatment of Cartier – one of the greatest jewellery and horological houses to sell a diamond parure or gold wristwatch – struck me as perhaps lacking in reverence and respect for what is arguably the world's greatest luxury brand. Mr Leymarie has since found himself a new job. And so it was that I found myself arriving at Cartier to meet the man who last year replaced Leymarie.

### The human touch

Cartier's Paris headquarters are no longer in the chic wood-panelled offices near the Avenue Georges V and the Avenue Montaigne; instead they occupy a glittering glass-and-metal fortress dominating an entire block just off the Rue Faubourg St Honore. I knew Cartier had grown but, as I stroll across the large courtyard, gazing up at hundreds of offices, I find myself surprised at just quite how large it has become. It occurs to me that I am getting a glimpse of the future; a time when giant corporations rather than nations will rule the Earth. And from the look of it, Cartier is already a great deal richer and better run than many small- to medium-sized countries. But while the face of Cartier the corporation may tend towards the overpowering and impersonal, its President Bernard Fornas is engaging and human. The only overpowering thing about him is a firm handshake – entirely in keeping with the bluff exterior of this vigorous, grey-haired corporate chieftain.

The Santos 100 has a mechanical movement, with the Cartier 049 calibre auto-winding mechanism.

A keen car collector, a lieutenant in the military reserve and also a connoisseur of the arts, Fornas is a refreshing antidote to the current practice of putting faceless young bureaucrats from Ecole Nationale d'Administration or Insead in charge of luxury marques. He does not have the pallid grey complexion and sunken eyes of a bean counter who lives hunched over a computer screen; instead, he has the rugged presence of a man who might lead a battalion of French Legionnaires but for the moment, is leading the world's most famous jewellers.

However, it has not always been this way: his CV rather wittily includes the fact that many years ago, before he joined Cartier and worked his way up through its numerous departments, he was involved in the sales and marketing of a household cleaning product called Monsieur Propre. No airbrushing here.

### Santos

Fornas allows himself to be enthusiastic and emotional about his products, rather than merely viewing them as units awaiting sale. Our meeting is just before the launch of the new

Alberto Santos-Dumont, the flamboyant aviator and friend of Louis Cartier, for whom the Santos watch was originally designed.



The new driving force behind Cartier, Bernard Fornas.

Santos line and I am privileged to be the first journalist to see the new oversized Santos. However remarkable this watch is, even more impressive is Fornas' enthusiasm for it. At one point he scoops up a fistful of the watches in his powerful hand and thrusts them into my face – almost daring me not to want them on my wrist. "Look at the curves," he says, pushing the new Santos to within about three inches of my right eyeball. "Look at the way the mechanism has been done. We have done everything to make sure that this product is 100% right." Believe it or not, he is merely describing the deployant buckle.

"I love the lock; I play with the lock all the time. Do you see the lock? We have tested it thousands and thousands of

times." I half expect him to burst into a string of music-hall French to emphasize his enthusiasm: "Zut Alors! Sacre Bleu! Bif, Baf, Bof!" However, he sinks back in his chair and contents himself with saying "I am optimistic because creativity and innovation are back in this house." Certainly, under creative director Giampiero Bodino, the man who helped put Dunhill's watches on the right track, Cartier has fielded some of its strongest watches since the launch of the Tank Française eight years ago.

"This year we have come back on the market very strongly with the big Santos," enthuses Fornas. "The last big launch of a new Santos was in 1978. After so many years, we had to do something; to pay tribute to this. It was a bold exercise," he says, surveying the big Santos that he holds in his hand. "But I think that we were right to do it; boldness is part of the Cartier attitude. The Santos is innovative; it is a way to give a future to our past; you really feel the Cartier touch when you look at this watch."

### That magnificent man

Indeed, it is difficult to think of a watch that is more eloquently expressive of Cartier and its mystique than the Santos. There were earlier examples of wrist-worn timepieces, but as far as I am concerned the wristwatch as we understand it today was born on the wrist of a dainty South American-born millionaire playboy and dandy of Belle Epoque Paris: Alberto Santos-Dumont. Santos-Dumont was a pioneer aviator but he pursued his passion for the conquest of the air with the elan and *savoir-faire* of a d'Orsay or a Brummel rather than the ruthless single-minded pragmatism that so characterises scientific endeavour today.

Son of a plantation owner, he had read all the works of Jules Verne by the age of 10 and, by his twenties, was living them in Paris, where – with his late father's fortune at his disposal – he commissioned ever more fanciful flying machines. His first was a balloon called *Brazil*, executed in bright yellow silk and bamboo. He was of course a regular at Maxim's and he would take what he called "aerial strolls" around Paris in his flying machines, putting down at favourite cafes and restaurants.

He eschewed protective flying garments, preferring to take to the air in elegant three-piece suits, hatted and gloved. His one concession to the demands of air travel was a request to his friend Louis Cartier for a watch that he could wear on his wrist, saving him from fumbling in his waistcoat for his pocket watch. That was in 1904. Two years later, the crowd saw him emerge from his *14-bis* plane, checking the result of Cartier's commis-



The three variants of the new Santos-Dumont watch – the slimmer version of the traditional Santos, without the screwed-down bezel. Cases of (left to right) pink gold (£5,675), white gold (£6,100) and yellow gold (£5,675).

sion. By 1908, Cartier fulfilled the overwhelming popular demand that ensued and created the 'Santos de Cartier' for a few lucky customers. By 1911 it was being made commercially.

### Standard bearer

One hundred years since its conception, the Santos is leading Cartier back to the future, or, to put it another way, forward to its roots. "We have noticed that when there is Cartier DNA in the product you have a success," explains Fornas. This may sound obvious but it is only under Fornas that it has actually happened. "With this new line we will be exactly where we should be." As well as the large, oversized Santos, which will be the resort watch of this summer, there are slimmer, dressier Santos-Dumont versions that come with either a pink-, white- or yellow-gold finish, and a choice of rhodium-plated, silver-grained or satin-finish dials, respectively.

But the Santos is not the only launch Fornas has this year. "There are an enormous number of new products: a variety

of both male and female products and also a new initiation watch," which is a far more polite and 'Cartier' way of saying 'entry level'. When challenged as to whether Cartier should be lowering the requirement for joining its club, he responds that "there are people who are not part of the Cartier universe who would like to be, but sometimes they are not as rich as they would like," making the arrival of a Cartier for under £1,000 seem like a disinterested act of charity; a good deed in a bad world.

"You also respect your customer and we are very keen to be sure that all our clients are well treated." And this does not just mean that they are fawned over when entering a boutique. Fornas shows his customers respect by ensuring "that all our products have a high level of quality. I prefer to delay a launch than to launch a watch, piece of jewellery or pen that is not at the level of excellence we want. Sometimes people say we are too exclusive, but I do not agree if you want your customers to be with you for eternity." ○

**Further information:** Cartier UK, Tel: 020 8080 0330, [www.cartier.com](http://www.cartier.com)